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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 5342
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 2167
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 1237
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 1211
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 JAKARTA 001638

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SUBJECT: ACEH -- POLITICAL SITUATION STEADY IN GOVERNOR'S
ABSENCE

REF: JAKARTA 0858 AND PREVIOUS

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Classified By: Ambassador Cameron R. Hume, reasons 1.4(b+d).

¶1. (U) This message was coordinated with Consulate Medan.

¶2. (C) SUMMARY: Aceh Governor Irwandi's absence from office over the past several weeks due to a stroke has not triggered any challenges to his authority. His deputy has kept a steady hand on the rudder and the former Aceh rebel movement GAM is gradually assuming a role in legitimate political structures. The military and the police seem to be acting in largely positive ways. Irwandi's recovery is progressing steadily and he may be able to return to office in the coming weeks. While several elements of the Helsinki MOU remain unfulfilled, the peace is holding up. END SUMMARY.

IRWANDI'S MEDICAL CONDITION IMPROVING

¶3. (C) Aceh Governor Irwandi Yusuf suffered a moderate stroke in Banda Aceh on August 7 and was evacuated that day to Singapore for treatment. A reported second stroke was actually a minor complication, according to medical professionals. Irwandi has been released from the hospital but remains in Singapore. He is feeding himself and is walking with minor assistance. He is taking speech therapy and physiotherapy daily, and his speech is becoming clearer.

¶4. (C) The Indonesian public remains largely unaware of the stroke. There has been little, if any, reporting of his absence or his condition in the national media. There were scattered reports in the Aceh press about his departure to Singapore for medical reasons but little speculation about the nature of his infirmity and no confirmation that it was a stroke. The Acehnese public largely believe that Irwandi is away due to a medical condition related to stress. The Vice Governor, who visited Irwandi several days after the stroke, assured the public in the press that the Governor's condition was improving and implicitly discouraged the notion that it

might be serious.

¶5. (C) Mission has monitored Irwandi's condition closely via sources close to Irwandi who are intimately familiar with his condition. Their assessment has been confirmed by information from independent sources who have visited Irwandi. Based on steady progress so far, Mission medical experts are optimistic about his prospects and estimate that, barring further complications, Irwandi could return to work in month or two.

¶6. (C) To some extent this depends on Irwandi's mental attitude. He is reportedly in a positive mood and is very determined to recover fully. Doctors were prepared to let him return to his home in Aceh this week, but on the advice of family and friends he has chosen to remain in Singapore until he is physically stronger. He is likely to be inundated with official business the moment he reaches Aceh, even if he does not immediately return to the office.

DEPUTY KEEPS A STEADY HAND

¶7. (C) Deputy Governor Muhammad Nazar has so far maintained a steady hand at the helm of government during Irwandi's absence. There is little reason to expect this will change in the immediate future, as long as Irwandi's prospects of returning to office remain good. There are two reasons for this. One is the understanding between the two leaders. They overcame differences and succeeded in establishing a balance between their respective political agendas and organizations. As head of SIRA, a political faction, Nazar is already well positioned for the provincial legislative elections in 2009 and does not need to wrest power away from

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Irwandi. Demonstrating reliability and consistency should enhance his public appeal in the elections. Nazar may have a streak of vanity, but he is committed to the success of autonomy in Aceh. He gains from being a good steward of the program that Irwandi and he have established.

¶8. (C) Second, Nazar actually fits the role of a traditional governor better than Irwandi does. Nazar is comfortable with bureaucratic structures and politics, and the local cabinet reshuffle in March strengthened his connection to senior administrators. Nazar is also more at home with the dominant Golkar and PDI-P fractions in the provincial legislature and can count on their support.

FORMER REBELS INTEGRATE INTO POLITICAL PROCESS

¶9. (C) Much of the GAM organization continues to view Nazar with skepticism, given the long rivalry between GAM and SIRA. However, GAM as a unitary political force no longer exists, and is now highly fractured, with little cadre depth below its small coterie of leaders. Absent any provocative actions by Nazar or other political forces, GAM is incapable of seizing Irwandi's absence as an opportunity to challenge his authority or radicalize the government's agenda. If Irwandi's absence persists into the 2009 election campaign, that could change.

¶10. (C) The more important question is really whether GAM might provoke police and military responses. Increasingly, however, the GAM rank-and-file have followed Irwandi into the democratic political process. Although many have yet to see real concrete benefits of peace and autonomy in terms jobs and homes, truly disenchanted elements are mostly on the fringe and without any central direction. Their affiliation with GAM may be more nominal than real, and their activities often constitute criminality rather than political dissent.

¶11. (C) GAM has formally abandoned its former name and symbols after the central government remained firm that it could not be the basis for a legitimate political party. The Aceh Party, as GAM has renamed itself, has a flag that, as

before is red with a black stripe at the top and bottom, but no longer bears the crescent and star at its center as it had previously. The shift allowed GAM to become one of six legally registered local political parties eligible, along with national parties, to contest the 2009 provincial elections.

HELSINKI MOU

¶12. (C) Several key elements of the 2005 Helsinki MOU remain unfulfilled, namely the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a Human Rights Court and a Joint Claims Commission. These must be addressed in the long run but are unaffected by Irwandi's absence. The role of CoSPA (Committee for a Sustainable Peace in Aceh) as a means of bridging differences and mobilizing consensus continues to grow. GAM representatives have recently joined it, giving it the capability to make progress on the remaining differences between GAM and central authorities regarding the MOU and the Law on the Governance of Aceh (LOGA).

MILITARY AND POLICE

¶13. (C) Security forces in Aceh remain unobtrusive and supportive of the democratic process. Major General Soenarko's recent installation as senior commander in Aceh has gone smoothly. His appointment raised some eyebrows because of his previous position as commander of the Army Special Forces Command, Kopassus. In fact, however, Soenarko (one name only) was assigned to the Iskandar Muda (Aceh) Military Area Command in the latest promotions cycle because

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no other positions at his rank were available. Soenarko has consistently said the right things in the media and he has been careful to distinguish between the former GAM and criminal elements. So far, his performance gives no reason to suspect any change in central policy on security.

¶14. (C) The police chief, Rismawan, who owes his position more to patronage than ability, has been largely ineffective as a leader but has not obstructed the peace process and the democratic transition.

PEACE HOLDING UP

¶15. (C) Irwandi will need time to get back up to speed and it remains to be seen whether he will have the physical stamina needed to exercise the demands of his office over the longer term. If Irwandi is not able, Nazar would take over until the next gubernatorial election in 2011. Whether Nazar could continue to command political support from the shared Irwandi-Nazar constituencies remains to be seen. So far, Irwandi's unexpected absence has been a successful test of Aceh's rudimentary democratic institutions and of the political consensus behind the current administration's course.

HUME